DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 956 HE 031 494

AUTHOR Byer, John L.
TITLE Fraternity Members' Perceptions of How Involvement in a Fraternity and Involvement in Student Government Has Influenced Their College Experiences.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Diversity (Student); *Fraternities; Higher Education; Interpersonal Competence; Interviews; Qualitative Research; Social Integration; *Student Attitudes; *Student Development; *Student Government; Student Leadership

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study investigated fraternity members' perceptions of how involvement in a fraternity and in student government influenced their college experiences. Four fraternity members who were also members of the student senate were interviewed. Three of the participants were Caucasian and one was African-American. Interview transcripts were categorized and coded using the constant comparative method. Analysis identified three themes: the leadership skill theme, the social skill theme, and the social acceptance versus social exclusion theme. Specific findings indicated that: (1) interviewees perceived that fraternity and student government involvement had promoted their leadership and social skills; (2) interviewees perceived some aspects of fraternity involvement as being socially exclusive, whereas other aspects of fraternity involvement were seen to encourage social acceptance of diversity; and (3) interviewees emphasized the importance of appreciating social interactions with different kinds of people, both within the fraternity and the college at large. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

HE

Fraternity Members' Perceptions of How Involvement in a Fraternity and Involvement in Student Government has Influenced their College Experiences

ED 421 956

By

John L. Byer

Mailed to the Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC)

on 8-26-1998

HE031 494

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John L. Byer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2

Abstract

This qualitative research study investigated fraternity members perceptions of how involvement in a fraternity and involvement in student government have influenced their college experiences. The interviewed participants in the study were four males between the ages of twenty and twenty-two. Three of the participants were Caucasian and one participant was African-American. During tape-recorded interviews, the participants described their perceptions of the effects of fraternity and student government on their college experience. The tape-recorded interviews were then transcribed. After categorizing and coding the interview transcripts according to the constant comparative method, three categories emerged. The interviewees perceived that fraternity and student government involvement had promoted their leadership skill and their social skill. The interviewees perceived some aspects of fraternity involvement as encouraging social exclusion of different kinds of people and the interviewees perceived other aspects of fraternity involvement as encouraging social acceptance of different kinds of people. When asked a follow-up question about how they can serve the interests of their fraternity and overall student body interests at the same time the participants emphasized the importance of appreciating social interactions with different kinds of people. One interviewee cited the importance of fraternity members and nonmembers socially building social harmony as they socially interact together during the planning and completion of campus projects.

Introduction

The author of this qualitative research study interviewed four fraternity members who were also members of the Student Government Associations' Student Senate during the 1997-1998 school year on a university campus in Southeastern United States. Three recurrent themes emerged from analyzing the transcripts of the four interviews. First, each interviewee perceived that involvement in a fraternity and involvement in Student Government has improved their overall leadership ability by promoting their organizational skills. Second, each interviewee perceived that involvement in a fraternity and involvement in Student Government has improved their social interaction ability by providing many high-quality opportunities for social interactions. Third, each interviewee perceived that both social acceptance of different kinds of people and social exclusion of different kinds of people had been a part of the social interaction opportunities associated with fraternity involvement. The preceding three themes, the leadership skill theme, the social skill theme, and the social acceptance versus social exclusion theme that emerged from the interviews have been major themes in published literature that has investigated the influence of involvement in fraternities and student government on the college experiences of the participants.

The Review of the Literature

Astin's (1977) involvement theory contends that involvement in working with college groups such as fraternities or participating in extracurricular activities encourages students to actively participate in the college community until graduation. After presenting fraternity involvement as potentially beneficial for fraternity members and entire campuses, Cufaude (1990) emphasized the need for fraternity members to socially accept a wide range of students in order to ameliorate prejudices and stereotypes among students.

Literature Concerning Leadership Skill Promoted by Fraternity Involvement

Larger numbers of students attending a college decrease motivation for students to become involved in extracurricular activities (Barker, 1968). According to Kuh and Lyons (1990), colleges with larger enrollments provide students with fewer leadership opportunities than colleges with smaller enrollments and students attending colleges with larger enrollments are discouraged from leading or participating in extracurricular activities. The chances of a student becoming captain of the baseball team or becoming a first-chair leader in the band are less on a college campus of thirty-thousand students than on a college campus of five thousand students. However, fraternities encourage leadership and participation in extracurricular activities by increasing the number of available leadership opportunities (Kuh & Lyons, 1990). Fraternity members have higher rates of involvement in college extracurricular activities then college males who do not belong to fraternities (Baier & Whipple, 1990). Fraternity involvement encourages leadership ability (Dollar, 1966). Thus, the literature has provided evidence that fraternity involvement may encourage members to get involved in leadership and participation in extracurricular activities.

Literature Concerning Social Skill Promoted by Fraternity Involvement

According to Baird (1969), fraternity involvement encourages a social orientation among members that heightens their social skill and their social confidence. In addition to providing evidence that fraternity members are very effective in socially interacting with students, Pike and Askew (1990) provided evidence that fraternity members function very effectively in groups. Involvement with a smaller group such as a fraternity at a college with a large enrollment may greatly promote development of interpersonal skills including social interaction skills (Pike &

Askew, 1990).

Literature Concerning Social Acceptance and Social Exclusion Promoted by Fraternity Involvement

Marlowe and Auvenshirne (1982) found that fraternity membership encourages members to have attitudes of social elitism. Fraternity members are encouraged to protect their fraternal identity by ethnocentrically avoiding social contact with people from different cultural backgrounds (Baier & Whipple, 1990). Fraternity membership has been associated with promoting social exclusion and accentuating social status distinctions among students (Kuh & Lyons, 1990). According to Maisel (1990), fraternities encourage socially exclusionary behavior among members.

Thus, the literature has indicated that fraternity involvement may help members develop leadership skill and social skill. However, the literature has also indicated that fraternity involvement may encourage members to be socially exclusive and hesitant to socially interact with different people from different cultures.

Purposes of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate four fraternity members' perceptions of how involvement in a fraternity and student government has influenced their overall college experience. This study endeavors to add to existing literature concerning the influence of participation in fraternities on students' college experiences.

Method

Subjects

The setting for this qualitative is a moderately selective state university of approximately

twelve thousand students in a southeastern state. The four participants who were interviewed during the 1997-1998 school year were all members of fraternities and were also elected members of the University's Student Government Association. The first interviewee, given the alias of Terry, is a junior. Terry, a twenty-one year old Caucasian male, is a student who moved to the university from another state. In addition to belonging to a fraternity hosted by the university, Terry serves with the university's Student Government Association. The second interviewee, given the alias of Craig, is a senior. Craig, a twenty-two year old Caucasian male, is a student who moved to the university from another state. In addition to belonging to a fraternity hosted by the university, Craig was elected to the university leadership position of student body president for the 1997-1998 school year. The third interviewee, given the alias of Greg, is a junior. Greg, a twenty year old African-American male, was elected to the university's Student Senate for the 1997-1998 school year. The fourth interviewee, given the alias of Jim, is a sophomore. Jim, a twenty year old Caucasian male, served with the University's Student Government Association during the 1997-1998 school year.

Qualitative Methodology

The first interviews of the four participants in the study were all tape-recorded during the 1997-1998 school year. After transcripts from the tape-recorded interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis, the participants were interviewed again.

The University's official permission for conducting the interviews was obtained through the Human Subjects Review Process. The four interviewees were all asked to respond to the following question. How has involvement in a fraternity and participation in student government influenced your overall college experience?

Qualitative Data Analysis

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and the interview transcripts were qualitatively analyzed using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method. First, all four interview transcripts were read and marginal notes were made that summarized topics discussed by the interviewees. Second, all four interview transcripts were reread and marginal notes were categorized according to the topics discussed by the interviewees. Third, the number of times each interview discussed each category was identified. Fourth, the similarities and differences of all four interviewees' perceptions of each category were compared to one another. Constant or continual comparisons of each interviewee's views on each category with the other interviewees' views on each category facilitated the process of reducing the number of categories. For instance, constant comparison of the interviewees' discussions of topics including personal development, organizational skills, time management, goal setting and goal attainment, public speaking and getting things accomplished resulted in the former topics being subsumed under the category of leadership skill. Constant comparisons each interviewees' discussions of social interaction opportunities, social confidence, and chances to meet people and get to know them resulted in the former topics being subsumed under the category of social skill. Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that interviewees held similar perspectives and views concerning the themes of leadership skill and social skill.

Some of the interviewees' comments indicated that they thought that the socializing associated with their involvement in a fraternity encouraged them to be more socially exclusive while the socializing associated with student government encouraged them to be less socially exclusive. Although each interviewee made at least one statement indicating that fraternity

involvement had made him more socially exclusive compared to involvement in student government, each interviewee also made one statement indicating that fraternity involvement did not make him more socially exclusive compared to involvement in student government. The following section will describe results of analyzing the transcripts according to the leadership skill theme, the social interaction theme, and the social acceptance versus social exclusion theme.

Interviewees' Comments Concerning the Leadership Skill Theme

Terry said that many of the members of his fraternity have good leadership qualities. He said his fraternity is preparing him with public speaking skills and leadership skills. Terry added that every member of his fraternity gets to work on a committee and every member of his fraternity gets to lead a committee at least once. Terry said getting to work on or lead committees made by fraternities promotes organizational skill and the ability to get projects accomplished when others are depending on you. Terry contended that fraternity involvement has helped him become effective at goal setting, goal meeting and goal reassessment. Terry feels that his fraternity promotes leadership skills by making members responsible to each other for the completion of projects.

Craig said that involvement in a fraternity and involvement in student government had taught him about responsibility, leadership and networking.

Greg said that involvement in his fraternity has encouraged him to feel like a role model who is expected to be a good leader. Greg added that involvement in a fraternity and involvement in student government has made him feel like a leader on campus in addition to making him happier.

Jim said that involvement in his fraternity and involvement in student government has promoted his leadership skills by helping him socially interact with people. Jim also felt that

fraternity involvement assisted both his time management skills and his ability to get tasks accomplished.

Interviewees' Comments Concerning the Social Skill Theme

Terry contended that fraternity involvement and the fraternity rush process was like a social ice breaker that helped him meet people. Describing the effect of fraternity involvement on his social life as incredible, Terry said that many social interactions and much social opportunity occur around the fraternity house where he lives. Terry mentioned Thursday night as a major social night on fraternity row that is attended by many sorority girls. Very importantly, Terry said his fraternity involvement has helped him get to know people even when he his just eating meals. Terry described how many fraternity members and many of their social contacts get to know each other better by eating at the same places each day. Terry described how fraternity members can easily make friends with people who eat at the same tables each day.

Craig said that fraternity involvement helped him meet people that he otherwise would not have met just by going to class. Craig elaborated that there are usually lots of people, including girls, around his fraternity house to socialize with. Craig continued by stating that being in a fraternity has helped him meet people by providing him with an immediate networking basis for friendship. Craig concluded that fraternity involvement helped him learn to socialize and talk to people while providing him with many opportunities to be outgoing and meet a lot of people.

Greg did not specifically address how involvement in his fraternity promoted his social skill. Instead, Greg discussed how social interactions around his fraternity and student government have made him a more well-rounded person.

Jim said that fraternity involvement has helped him meet a lot of people and a lot of new people that he might not have. Jim said the biggest advantage in fraternity involvement and student government involvement is learning how to socially interact with other people.

Interviewees' Comments Concerning the Social Acceptance Versus Social Exclusion Theme

Terry stated that bonds of friendship between fraternity members and their social contacts may be stronger than the bonds of friendship between members of the Student Government Association. Discussing Thursday night socials around his fraternity house, Terry hinted at the social exclusion theme by stating that most of the people around are fraternity or sorority members. However, suggesting social acceptance, he seemed happy that some independents or nongreeks would come by and visit fraternity houses. Terry said that he has some friends that come by his fraternity house on Thursday nights and at other times during the week who will probably never be Greek but they enjoy the music and the socializing around the house. Implying that socially exclusive social interactions are involved in fraternity and sorority socializing, Terry stated that his fraternity socially connects people who can easily engage with each other in comfortable social interactions and he added that sororities socially connect people the same way. Although Terry clearly suggested that exclusive social interactions based on insular and esoteric social interaction styles practiced by a similar group of people are central to his fraternity, he also pointed to his fraternity as a socially accepting group that welcomes some social contacts with different kinds of people.

Craig, the fraternity leader who was elected student body president, spoke little of social exclusion being involved in fraternities. However, Craig did state that the socializing around student government involves a goal or product but socializing around his fraternity is for purely

social motives of having fun and enjoying relaxation. Craig described his fraternity as an immediate networking base for friendship. He described the his fraternity as a dependable group that will always be there for you. Presenting his fraternity as an initial networking basis for establishing friendships, Craig said the social involvement encouraged by his fraternity is not just social involvement within the Greek system but also includes social involvement in a wide range of organizations such as honor societies and student government. Craig said that his fraternity was the initial networking base that facilitated his involvement in different organizations that socially connected him with different kinds of people. Thus, Craig pointed to how fraternity involvement may involve potentially exclusive social interactions among similar people who relax and have fun around his fraternity house by engaging in similar social interaction styles. However, Craig indicated that his fraternity encourages members to become involved in different organizations that provide social connections to different kinds of people.

In contrast to Craig, who barely suggested one time that some social exclusion could be involved in his fraternity, Greg frequently presented his fraternity as an insular and socially exclusive group of similar people. Comparing his involvement in his fraternity with his involvement in student government, Greg said that he encounters a smaller range of people in his fraternity than he encounters in student government. He described the fraternity system as a brotherhood environment comprised by similar people and the sorority system as a sisterhood environment comprised by similar people. Greg said that he deals with the same type of people in his fraternity. Continuing, Greg discussed how fraternity and sorority members who are also in student government get opportunities to socialize with independents in student government who they would not normally interact with. Then, Greg described how fraternity and sorority members

who have socially interacted with independents around student government go back and share these social experiences with different kinds of people with members of their respective fraternities and sororities. According to Greg, the goal of a fraternity is to do good for the fraternity and the campus while the goal for student government is to do good for the students. Although Greg clearly presented his fraternity as a somewhat exclusive social grouping, he indicated that fraternity involvement has helped be him well-adjusted and socially involved enough to meet and establish friendships with a wide range of people.

Jim was the most hesitant of the four interviewees to indicate any social exclusion in his fraternity. Jim said that student government and his fraternity each have the same goal and that goal is to make their respective organizations better overall. Jim emphasized how involvement in student government and involvement in his fraternity have helped him learn how to effectively interact with different kinds of people with different personalities in order to bring projects to fruition.

Thus, the interviewees suggested that some aspects of fraternity involvement could encourage social exclusion of different kinds of people. However, the interviewees clearly indicated that other aspects of fraternity involvement could encourage social acceptance of different kinds of people.

Follow-up Interview Question

In order to clarify ambiguity concerning fraternity members' perceptions of the extent of their fraternity's promotion of social acceptance and social exclusion, more interviews were held in which the interviewees were asked this question. As a fraternity member in student government how can you serve the overall interests of both your fraternity and the overall student body?

Interviewees' Responses to the Follow-up Interview Question

All the interviewees emphasized the need be socially accepting of a wider range of of students than the students they normally associate with around their fraternities. All the interviews suggested that if fraternity members would appreciate different kinds of people and if fraternity members would be open to social interactions with different kinds of people then fraternity goals could coherently work in synchronized tandem with overall student body goals.

Craig accentuated the need to appreciate and socially accept different kinds of people. Craig conceded that much of the socializing around his fraternity is socializing with a similar type of people. Craig said that he makes sure to retain a continuing appreciation of different kinds of people that encourages him to wholeheartedly accept social interactions with different kinds of people.

Craig pointed to university events such as homecoming and the annual beauty pageant as being choice opportunities for fraternity members and students who are not in fraternities to mutually plan and carry out important projects. Craig said that many social interactions and friendships have developed between Greeks and independents who have mutually worked together to bring important university events to fruition. Craig added that he thinks that it is important for all students to realize that we are all students who have some common interests like developing ourselves and the campus.

Conclusion

The interviewees consistently indicated their perceptions that involvement in a fraternity and involvement in student government have facilitated their development of leadership skill and social skill. However, the interviewees all suggested that social exclusion could be encouraged by the

kinds of social interactions that occur around their fraternities. The interviewees indicated their perceptions that social interactions on campus could be improved if fraternity members would socially interact with a wider range of students than comparatively narrow range of students they ordinarily socialize with around their fraternity. The key concepts that emerged from the interviewees' responses to the follow-up question were appreciation of different kinds of people and acceptance of social interactions with different kinds of people. The interviewees have indicated their perceptions that fraternity members who appreciate social interactions with different kinds of people ameliorate tendencies of the fraternity system to encourage exclusive socializing. Craig's perceived that having fraternity members and nonmembers share leadership and work on campus projects such as homecoming and the annual beauty pageant is an excellent way to encourage social interactions among fraternity members and nonmembers. Craig's perception that social harmony results from Greek members and nonmembers working together on campus projects coincided with Cufaude's (1990) contention that Greeks and independents who share leadership of campus projects can build social harmony as they socially interact in the process of bringing important campus projects to fruition.

The literature and the interviews have indicated that fraternity members perceive that fraternity involvement has facilitated their development of leadership skill and social skill. The literature and the interviews have also indicated that fraternity members benefit from socially interacting with a wide range of independents during the planning and carrying out of important campus projects.

References

Astin, A. W. (1977). Four Critical Years: Effects of College on Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Baird, L. L. (1969). The Effects of College Residence on Students' Self-Concepts, Goals, and Achievements. Personnel and Guidance Journal, 47, 1015-1021.

Barker, R. G. (1968). Ecological Psychology: Concepts and Methods for Studying the Environment of Human Behavior. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Cufaude, J. (1990). Strategies from an Greek Advisor: Maximizing the Greek Cocurriculums' Potential. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Journal, 28 (1), 82-90.

Dollar, R. J. (1966). Student Characteristics and Choice of Housing. Journal of College Student Personnel, 7 (3), 147-150.

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. New York: Gruyter.

Kuh, G. D. & Lyons, J. W. (1990). Fraternities and Sororities: Lessons from the College Experiences Study. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Journal, 28 (1), 20-29.

Maisel, J. P. (1990). Social Fraternities and Sororities are not Conducive to the Educational Process. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Journal, 28 (1), 8-12.

Marlowe, A. E. & Auvenshine, C. D. (1982). Greek Membership, its Impact on the Moral Development of Freshmen. Journal of College Student Personnel, 23 (1), 53-57.

Pike, G. R. & Askew, J. W. (1990). The Impact of Fraternity or Sorority Membership on Academic Involvement and Learning Outcomes. National Association of Student Personnel

Administrators Journal, 28 (1), 13-19.